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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 000539

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

FOR DRL DAS BARKS-RUGGLES FROM AMBASSADOR MORIARTY

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [BG](#)  
SUBJECT: BANGLADESH SCENESETTER FOR DRL DEPUTY ASSISTANT  
SECRETARY BARKS-RUGGLES

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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SUMMARY  
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11. (C) Your visit to Bangladesh comes at a critical juncture in the Caretaker Government's term. The Government begins on May 22 a dialogue with the political parties to set the stage for Parliamentary elections in the third week of December, to institutionalize reforms initiated by the Government, and to ensure the Government's safe exit following elections. Imprisoned former Prime Ministers Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia maintain great influence in their respective parties, and calls for them to be released are increasing from their supporters. Many are suspicious about the Army's political role and criticize its interference in the internal affairs of the parties and in the media. Others fear a return to the status quo ante and the violent "winner-take-all" political culture. We continue to emphasize the need for the Government to adhere to its election roadmap and to international norms of justice and human rights, while also addressing the basic needs of Bangladesh's population. We have urged the Government to relax the State of Emergency, which the Chief Adviser has agreed to do gradually. We have called upon the political parties to play a responsible role in helping to set conditions for elections by the end of the year. Your visit follows by two weeks that of State's Coordinator for Counterterrorism Ambassador Dell Dailey, which will provide an opportunity to continue to promote the importance of transparency and accountability in law enforcement agencies. In particular, you will be able to assess how the USG can help the Rapid Action Battalion, Bangladesh's lead force in the fight against terrorism, further improve its human rights performance.

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DEMOCRACY  
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12. (C) The Caretaker Government (CTG) came to power in January 2007, the day after a State of Emergency was declared to quell political violence that was spinning out of control in the run-up to Parliamentary elections. The CTG, made up of 11 non-political advisers and strongly supported by the military, cancelled the elections and began cracking down on endemic political corruption and violence. The crackdown initially won broad public support, but frustration with the Caretaker Government spilled onto the streets in late August; at that point a dispute at Dhaka University between students and soldiers became a rallying point for thousands of Bangladeshis disaffected by inflation, other economic woes and restrictions on political activity. The Government

stopped the protests by imposing a curfew backed up by a show of force from the army. Government leaders acknowledged privately the need to stick to the election roadmap, to open up political discourse, and to communicate more effectively with the public.

13. (C) Bangladeshis welcomed an easing of the ban on politics and the initiation of formal dialogue between the Election Commission and the parties on political reform in September 2007. The relaxation of the ban threw internal party disputes into sharp relief. The most visible struggle is within the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which governed the country from 2001 to 2006 under former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. The Awami League, the other major party, also has experienced internal strife between reformers and loyalists to former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, but has maintained a public show of unity. Army Chief General Moeen Uddin Ahmed repeatedly has stated he has no political ambitions, even as he assumes by default a higher public profile than the Chief Adviser, who is the top official in the Caretaker Government. General Moeen's term as Army Chief recently was extended by one year, to June 2009.

14. (C) The Caretaker Government marked its first anniversary in January with a broad shake-up. Five widely respected Bangladeshis took the place of advisers who resigned under pressure after a series of missteps contributed to the Government's eroding popularity. Five special assistants to the Chief Adviser also have been named to help the overworked Council manage its ambitious agenda. These changes have helped make the Caretaker Government more effective, but the Government remains weak.

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15. (C) In the midst of the political jockeying, voter registration continues in preparation for national elections. While the mechanics of holding elections seem to be largely on track, there is still much debate about an "exit strategy" for the Caretaker Government and the military, who want to ensure a newly elected government maintains reforms and refrains from settling scores. They fear retribution from a resurgent political class that has been the main target of the anti-corruption campaign.

16. (C) In a nationally broadcast speech May 12, the Chief Adviser announced that Parliamentary elections would take place the third week of December. He also announced a relaxation of restrictions on political activity to facilitate campaigning and called for a national charter to improve governance. He said government dialogue with political parties would start May 22 to resolve major stumbling blocks to establishing a basic framework for elections and transfer of power. One major sticking point is the corruption cases against the two former prime ministers, which have languished in court for a multitude of reasons, including legal maneuvers by the lawyers for the accused and apparent difficulties in effectively marshaling evidence against the two ladies. The result is that the Awami League, the BNP and at least one other political party have demanded the release of the imprisoned former Prime Ministers in the run-up to dialogue with the Caretaker Government. At the same time, there is much speculation about the role of the Bangladesh military in engineering the dialogue and its outcome.

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HUMAN AND LABOR RIGHTS  
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17. (C) The Emergency Powers Rules of 2007 (EPR) suspends many fundamental rights, including freedom of press, freedom of association and the right to bail. Journalists complain of frequent attempts by army intelligence to influence news coverage, and they say the interference has led to widespread self-censorship. The anti-corruption drive initiated by the

government, while greeted with popular support, has given rise to concerns about due process.

18. (U) Trafficking in persons remains a serious problem affecting men, women and children. Men seeking work abroad as expatriate labor in countries such as Malaysia and the Middle East find themselves in exploitative situations of forced labor. Women and children are trafficked internally for commercial sexual exploitation. Labor conditions remain a concern in Bangladesh's huge ready-made-garment industry, although significant progress has been made in the past year in the Export Processing Zones. The U.S. Trade Representative's ongoing General System of Preferences review is looking at labor conditions in garment factories, EPZ compliance with labor laws and child labor in the shrimp industry.

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COUNTERTERRORISM, HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE RAB  
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19. (C) Although Bangladesh is a moderate Muslim-majority nation, its porous borders -- particularly its maritime borders -- make it a potential transit point and safe-haven for terrorists. The USG funds many programs in Bangladesh to counter terrorism, including a wide range of training under the Anti-Terrorist Assistance program coordinated by the State Department. The lead counterterrorism force in Bangladesh is the Rapid Action Battalion, whose members are recruited from the police and military for two-year tours. The RAB played a pivotal role in the crackdown on the Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), an extremist organization responsible for 450 simultaneous explosions around the country in 2005 and a subsequent bombing campaign that terrorized the nation. So far, the USG has refrained from engaging the RAB because of human rights concerns, particularly in the years immediately following its formation in 2004. RAB's human rights record has improved significantly under the Caretaker Government, during which the number of reported extrajudicial killings has plummeted. A recent analysis of reported RAB extrajudicial killings since the Caretaker Government came to power found one of 12 RAB battalion's responsible for nearly one-third of the deaths

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while six battalions together accounted but for a fraction. During the first two weeks of March the United Kingdom provided human rights training to RAB to build on the positive trend.

110. (C) In light of the improved record, the Embassy is proposing a strategy for engaging the RAB that would advance counterterrorism goals while addressing USG human rights concerns. Under the proposal, a USG interagency team would assess the training needs of the RAB, focusing first on human rights issues such as rules of engagement, accountability and transparency. A timely decision about engaging the RAB would ensure the training begins under the auspices of the Caretaker Government, which has demonstrated its commitment to fighting terrorism and improving the human-rights performance of law enforcement organizations.

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YOUR VISIT  
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111. (C) Your visit will underscore USG support for a peaceful transition in Bangladesh by the end of 2008. In your meetings with the Government, you should emphasize adherence to the elections roadmap, encourage the ongoing political dialogue and urge a relaxation of the state of emergency. You also should urge the political parties to act responsibly to make the return to democracy a success. In meetings with labor officials you should stress engaging with workers' rights organizations. Your meetings with the RAB will provide an opportunity to assess its commitment to fighting terrorism

and the prospects for further improving its human rights  
record with USG assistance.  
Moriarty